



# SOUNDINGS

East Asia Monthly

A Newsletter for and by Undergraduates

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## THE SOUTH-EAST ASIA EDITION

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### About the Weatherhead East Asian Institute:

Since its establishment in 1949, Columbia University's Weatherhead East Asian Institute has been a major center for research, teaching, and publishing on modern and contemporary Asia. The Institute's mission is to train new generations of experts in the Asian humanities, social sciences, and the professions and to enhance understanding of East Asia in the wider community.

## Festival of Light

By Hannah Kim, GS '10

Founded in 2004, the Southeast Asian League (SEAL) was instituted in recognition of the rich cultural diversity of Southeast Asian nations such as Brunei, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

SEAL is a forum designed to serve the diverse Southeast Asian groups and students within the Columbia community. The primary mission of SEAL is to promote the continued

*(SEAL cont. on page 4)*



*A Krathong, used to celebrate the upcoming Southeast Asian light festival.*

## Burmese Cuisine: Village Mingala

By Tiffany Tang, CC '09

Village Mingala is easy to miss: the small Burmese restaurant is tucked in the middle of sheltered (relative to the nearby St. Mark's Place) 7<sup>th</sup> Street. From the outside, it looks a little tacky as bright red Christmas lights line the window.

Inside, however, the restaurant is comfortable and tasteful. Traditional Burmese artwork lines the brick walls, and the menus are introduced with gorgeous photographs of Burmese scenery. Food from Burma is heavily influenced by

its neighbors, China and India, but the nationalistic décor of Village Mingala promised a more unique flavor.

Burmese salads are famous for their ability to combine a

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**Food from Burma is heavily influenced by its neighbors, China and India, but the nationalistic décor of Village Mingala promised a more unique flavor.**

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random assortment of ingredients and come out with something greater than a sum of their parts. To highlight this emphasis on ingredients, tea leaf salad often arrives at the table with its ingredients neatly

separated (and looking suspiciously un-salad-like), prompting either the waiter or the diner to toss it immediately before eating.

Village Mingala's Green Tea Leaf Salad came pre-tossed, but the resulting dish was just as tasty. Easily the highlight of the meal, the salad was made with Burmese green tea leaves, sesame seeds, tomatoes, lettuce, cabbage, split yellow beans, peanuts, and lemon twists. The salad was complex in both texture and flavor. The sesame seeds and peanuts were crisp, and the lemon twists were tangy. The green tea leaves, earthy and vaguely bitter, provided an unusual density of flavor. What prevented the salad from becoming completely

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spectacular, however, was the perplexing addition of diced tomatoes, whose conventional taste overwhelmed the more delicate tea leaves and sesame seeds, and whose juice rendered what is usually a crisp salad soggy.

I tried the Nungyi Kyaw, composed of thick rice noodles stir-fried with slices of tofu, scallions, and what the menu called “a light garlic sauce” but seemed to be mainly soy sauce. Two crispy fried eggs rested on top. The noodles were dense and chewy and fun to eat. As a whole, the sauce was light and not too greasy. Unfortunately, like the other main dishes I tried, the Nungyi Kyaw was fairly boring.

The Chinese influence came out most distinctly in the Broccoli Fried Rice and the Pineapple Chicken. The fried rice, while well-prepared, was

indistinguishable from fried rice from your run-of-the-mill Chinese restaurant. Those looking for a slice of Burmese culture should order something else. The Pineapple Chicken was a little more exciting, but not by much. The slices of chicken were juicy, the broccoli and bell peppers and peas and zucchini were crisp, and the pineapple chunks were fun (as any inclusion of pineapple into Asian cuisine inevitably is), but the spicy red curry sauce was not red and only marginally spicy. Often, curries become blander when the coconut milk overpowers the spice. Not so with the Pineapple Chicken—the curry sauce was simply bland.

For what you get, Village Mingala is a little on the pricey side. The Pineapple Chicken dish was a whopping \$13. Lunch specials are more reasonable—between 11:30 a.m. and 4 p.m. you can get a similar dish with a soup or

salad. Those looking for unusual flavors should try the Green Tea Leaf Salad.



*The exterior of Village Mingala*

**Village Mingala**  
21 E. 7th St. (near 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave.)  
New York, NY 10003  
(212) 529-3656

**Green Tea Leaf Salad**  
(\$8.50)

**Pineapple Chicken**  
(\$12.95)

**Broccoli Fried Rice**  
(\$7.95)

**Nungyi Kyaw**  
(\$8.95)

### About Soundings:

Published monthly by the Weatherhead Undergraduate Council, *Soundings* aims to help better incorporate undergraduates into the broader East Asian Studies community at Columbia by providing increased access to information about East Asia-related groups, activities, and events. Incorporating academic as well as non-academic news and listings, it seeks to help interested undergraduates further pursue their interest in East Asia, whatever form it may take.

*Soundings* is edited by Preeti Bhattacharji. If you have any questions or comments, or would like to contribute, you can contact her at [pb2205@columbia.edu](mailto:pb2205@columbia.edu).

## Thai Student Association

By Christine E. Kwon, CC '10

The Thai Student Association (TSA) aims to foster awareness and appreciation for Thai culture and heritage, as well as provide a social support network for Thai international students looking, perhaps, for a bit of Bangkok in New York. Established fifteen years ago by a small group of Thai students, the TSA continues to grow in membership every year, especially among non-Thai students.

In the spirit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the TSA works in cooperation with other Southeast Asian cultural groups on campus for myriad events held throughout the academic year. In the fall semester, the TSA co-sponsored and participated in

“Spice Night,” an event geared to introduce East and Southeast Asian food to the campus community, providing a sampler of culture manifested in culinary form. The spring semester promises more cultural offerings with “Movie Night,” to introduce students to Thai films that give viewers a greater understanding of Thai culture.

The TSA will also be hosting “Thai Night,” their signature annual festival. Revisiting the idea of cuisine as a lens through which to understand the beauty, complexity, and idiosyncracies of Thai culture, “Thai Night” also brings in other cultural elements such as Thai music—with traditional dance and instruments—and Thai martial arts to offer a view of the richness of Thai culture to the greater Columbia community.

“We want to reach out to both those who are Thai and non-

Thai,” explains Saireudee Chaturantabut, President of the TSA. “Thai Night” therefore caters to both members of the Thai community and members of the not-Thai-but-interested community—those of us whose knowledge of Thailand may be restricted to Pad Thai and some vague notion of something called “Thai massage.”

Beyond the Thai community at Columbia there is the Thai community in New York City, a group that the TSA cooperates with “to introduce Thailand and Thai cultures to non-Thai people,” according to Chaturantabut. The TSA co-sponsored an event this semester with the Thai Tourism Authority in NYC called “Thai Fest,” featuring performances of Thai music and dance, as well as food (of course), and a raffle for travel to Thailand and various Thai souvenirs.

I am almost certain that I speak for a number of us in admitting that the five things I know about Thailand are limited to a few food items and that continually-reincarnated book/musical/film *The King and I*. Columbia’s TSA works to expand that knowledge through participation in its various cultural events. We are all invited to partake in some delicious home-cooked Thai cuisine, to engage in dialogue through film and dance and music—to simply absorb Thai culture without having to travel halfway around the globe. Come to “Thai Night.” Bring your appetite. And bring your questions.

Those interested in joining TSA’s mailing list should contact their webmaster at [nv2157@columbia.edu](mailto:nv2157@columbia.edu). For further information about the TSA and their activities, contact Saireudee C. (President), at [sc2696@columbia.edu](mailto:sc2696@columbia.edu), or Pimpatchara K. (Secretary, at [pk2236@columbia.edu](mailto:pk2236@columbia.edu)).

# “Dialogue” at Gallery Vietnam

By Preeti Bhattacharji, CC '09

You may be a cynical New Yorker. Usually, I am too. After living in the City a few years, it's easy to think you've seen it all. But I promise you: you've never seen anything like Gallery Vietnam.

According to its website, Gallery Vietnam is a Vietnamese gallery dedicated to showcasing contemporary Vietnamese art. But its website hasn't been updated since most of us were in high school. At first, I was worried that the neglected site meant the gallery had long been turned into a Starbucks. But a quick call to the number listed on the site revealed, much to my relief, that the gallery was still open.

After taking the I train down to Franklin Street, I wandered west in search of the gallery. Within two blocks, I found it. With a surge of victorious pride, I approached the door. And was promptly met by a “Sorry! We're Closed!” sign. Pride fizzled to disappointment just as a light drizzle started to seep from the sky.

I wandered next door in search of shelter and answers, and found myself walking into an upscale Vietnamese restaurant. I approached the host, who was confused by seeing a patron at the un-meal-like hour of 4 p.m. I asked him about the gallery next door, and much to my delight, he signaled that I follow and started walking toward the kitchen.

Behind the kitchen, he led me to an antique door, sealed by planks and a dusty wheel reminiscent of a medieval dungeon. I looked nervously from the door to my guide, as my mind cycled through every horror movie I had ever seen.

Don't open the door, I silently willed. Sure enough, with a twist of the wheel and a shove of two planks, he pushed open the creaky door and ushered me inside.

Just like that, I was in a brightly lit office, where two receptionists (dressed in all black, of course) chattered brightly on their cell phones. Behind the receptionists lay the gallery, which looked more like

closed) stand two, six-foot-tall, brushed bronze storks.

Throughout the room, artifacts made of every possible medium turn the gallery into a beautiful junkyard. Bowl lamps shaped like lotus flowers spring up like weeds between wicker baskets. In one corner, a small statue of Christ quietly oversees the scene, flanked by two slim, bronze Buddhas who sit in solemn meditation.



Original Illustration by Sonia Tycko, CC '09

an upscale flea market than the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Ornate, carved benches and tables line each wall, presenting a variety of beautiful knickknacks. Pillar lamps rise from the floor, with white storks embroidered on their casings. An antique motorcycle sits patiently in the corner, quietly waiting for its owner to come home. And on either side of the front door (which falsely proclaims that the gallery is

And then, there were the paintings.

The current exhibition is called “Dialogue” and is by two artists who also happen to be twin brothers. The men, Le Ngoc Thanh and Le Duc Hai, studied oil and lacquer painting in Hue City, Vietnam. And here in New York, they have presented a startling collection using little more than geometric shapes, bold colors, and interesting allusions to war and peace.

On one wall sit three paintings featuring the same figure: a faceless girl with a square head and two pigtailed tied behind her neck. Each time she appears, she wears a different outfit on her otherwise nondescript body, and her sex is marked by nothing more than her hairstyle and her evolving costumes. In lieu of eyes, a nose, and a mouth, her face is pock-marked with flowers (sometimes several, sometimes a single, large flower in the center).

Directly across from the girls' wall hangs a male series of the same figure. Like the girls, he always has a square head and no face, and his sex is marked—once again—through hair and clothing. While the female figures wear bright patterns, the men wear a simple khaki and green uniform.

The uniform is the first hint of any martial overtones. Further down the room, more creep in. In the next set of paintings, a gun—checkered black-and-white—springs from a pot of soil like a plant. Out of the gun spews not bullets, but a single flower. Further down, a painting features a massive red tank rolling across the scene, but it, too, spits flowers instead of bullets, rendering it as harmless as Clifford the Dog. Each painting features the silhouette of a ceiling lamp, bearing a bare bulb. Given the other martial allusions, the lamp suggests the “Dialogue” is actually an interrogation.

Gallery Vietnam is a bizarre and fantastic experience. From the moment you step through its ethereal door, you'll be thrown into a world of old and new, order and chaos, war and peace. And you won't regret a moment in this unique bastion of Southeast Asian art. Check it out, before it turns into a Starbucks.

**Gallery Vietnam**  
**345 Greenwich St.**  
**New York, NY 10013**  
**(212) 431-8889**

(SEAL contd. from page 1)

sharing, cooperation and understanding between the different Southeast Asian communities on campus to maximize the wealth of cultural and social resources available. The events hosted by SEAL range from educational and informative to entertaining and relaxed, all designed to cater to the Columbia student body.

For example, the upcoming Festival of the Loy Krathong, more commonly known as the Light Festival, is slated for the first week of December. This is a celebration that is deeply rooted in Southeast Asia, especially Thai and Cambodian culture. During the Light Festival, candles are placed in floating rafts and launched into a stream as a sign of gratitude to the deity Mae Kongka, also known as Mother of the Water. A celebration of hope, reverence, and happiness, this ceremony aims to atone for the sins, disappointments, and disasters of the past, to repent and wish for a more prosperous and joyous future. To an agrarian culture whose economic life depended on the land and the abundance of rain, this festival is very meaningful and emotionally charged.

The origins of the Festival of Loy Krathong traces back 700 years to a lady of the Royal Court named Naang Noppamart, who

was a favored concubine of King Pra-ruang of Sukothai. Of renowned beauty and intelligence, Naang actually created the first *krathong* (literally: a cup made of leaf), the vehicle used to carry the light tribute downstream by using banana leaves worked into the shape of a lotus.

Nowadays, the Festival of the Loy Krathong is hugely popular and even the national government, municipalities, commercial enterprises, and major institutions all create huge *krathongs* to compete in a series of contests held in Chiangmai, Thailand.

The Southeast Asian League is interested in expanding its network and increasing activism by augmenting its current activities to include community volunteer work and fundraising for Southeast Asian charities, as well as co-sponsoring relevant events with other campus organizations. SEAL welcomes all inquiries regarding membership and co-sponsorship opportunities. For all inquiries please contact Evelyn Phan, CC' 10, at [epp2102@columbia.edu](mailto:epp2102@columbia.edu).

**SEAL Light Festival  
December 5, 2008  
7 p.m. to 8 p.m.  
East Ramp Lounge  
Lerner Hall**



The Festival of the Loy Krathong being celebrated in Chiangmai, Thailand

## Upcoming Events

**Thursday, November 20:**

### "More Carrot Than Stick: Beijing's Adjusted Taiwan Policy"

Chong-pin Lin, Professor in the Graduate Institute of International Affairs and Strategic Studies at Tamkang University and former President of the Foundation of International and Cross-Strait Studies, Deputy Minister of Taiwan's National Defense and Vice Chairman of the Mainland Affairs Council

12 p.m. to 1:30 p.m.

International Affairs Building, Room 918.

Co-Sponsored by the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office of New York

**Thursday, November 20:**

### Taste of Asia! Culinary Event

Mark your calendars for APAC's yearly culinary extravaganza featuring an all-you-can-eat Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Southeast Asian buffet.

6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

IAB 6th Floor, SIPA Lounge

Tickets: \$5 in advance, \$7 at the door

**Thursday, November 20:**

### "Japan's About Face" Screening and Discussion

Micah Fink, Filmmaker

Brown Bag Lecture Series: "Soldiers and Soldiering in 20<sup>th</sup> c. Japan"

6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m.

International Affairs Building, 4th Floor, Room 413

**Tuesday, December 2:**

### "Democratization and Corruption: Learning from African and Southeast Asian Experiences"

Philip Keefer, Lead Research Economist in the Development Research Group of the World Bank, Washington D.C.

Carl LeVan, Assistant Professor, School of International Service, Chair, Council on African Studies; Africa Coordinator, American University

Africa/Asia Series on Governance

3:30 p.m. to 5 p.m.

IAB 918.

Co-sponsored by the Institute of African Studies

**Thursday, December 4:**

### "Financial Crisis: Impact on Japan and Lessons from Japan"

Shijuro Ogata, Former Deputy Governor of International Relations, Bank of Japan

Brown Bag Lecture

12 noon to 1:30 p.m.

International Affairs Building, Room 918

No Reservations Required

Co-Sponsored by the Center on Japanese Economy and Business

**Thursday, December 4:**

### "More or Less Real: The Status of Language and Modernism in Late-Colonial Korea"

Speaker: Chris Hanscom, Assistant Professor of Korean Literature, Dartmouth College

Discussant: Jin-kyung Lee, Associate Professor of Modern Korean Literature, University of California, San Diego

Center for Korean Research Lecture

4:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.

International Affairs Building, Room 918

For more events, visit the Weatherhead calendar at

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/weai/about-events.html>